



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release March 13, 1985

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE REVIEWING OPTIONS FOR 1985 DUCK HARVEST REGULATIONS

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is considering the need to decrease next fall's harvest of mallards and pintails, because last year breeding populations of the two species were at about their lowest level in 30 years.

The duck numbers have declined primarily as a result of several successive years of poor habitat conditions caused by prolonged drought in the prime duck nesting areas of Canada. Fewer ducklings have survived, and as a result there are fewer ducks returning to the nesting grounds to breed.

Biologists can't forecast the duck breeding picture for this year until surveys of spring breeding populations and habitat conditions are completed. However, based on the decreases in duck numbers observed last year, the Service is reviewing possible alternatives for restricting the duck harvest.

The Service originally considered more restrictive hunting regulations for 1984, but decided not to change last fall's regulations so that a 5-year study of "stabilized" regulations could be completed. The Service announced last year that more restrictive regulations would be considered during 1985.

The stabilized regulations study has been conducted jointly by the United States and Canada in an attempt to assess better the relationship between hunting regulations and duck populations. For many years, hunting regulations were adjusted annually to correspond with the number of ducks anticipated in the fall flight. The frequent changes made it difficult to isolate the effects of hunting regulations from other factors affecting duck numbers, such as weather, habitat conditions, and losses to predators. In 1979, Canada stabilized season lengths and bag limits for ducks. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service joined with Canada in the program in 1980. Since then, duck season lengths and bag limits have been kept about the same each year.

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Although the 1984 hunting season was the last harvest period of the stabilized regulations study, the Fish and Wildlife Service is still conducting field work, gathering data, and evaluating the information collected. Final results of the study are expected to be available during 1986. In the meantime, hunting regulations for 1985 and 1986 will have to be promulgated without the benefit of a full analysis and evaluation of the study.

Because of the current declines in duck numbers, the Service believes more restrictive regulations may be advisable now to help speed the recovery of duck populations when habitat conditions improve. Therefore, the Service is considering several options for regulating duck harvests in 1985-86 and subsequent years:

(1) Stabilized regulations -- establish restrictive regulations in all four waterfowl flyways that would remain in effect for a predetermined length of time.

(2) Annual assessment -- establish regulations by flyway on an annual basis in response to size of duck populations. This would continue the approach used from the late 1950's through the mid-1970's.

(3) Prescription regulations -- establish regulations in each flyway that would prescribe in advance the actions that would be taken in response to annual population size or habitat conditions. Season lengths and bag limits would be established on the basis of harvest reduction objectives. For example, if the estimated breeding population of mallards falls below a certain level, regulations would be developed to decrease the harvest by an established percentage. These restrictions would remain in effect until a predetermined population level is achieved.

(4) Other options -- duck harvest could also be restricted by adjusting or eliminating zones, split seasons, bonus bags and special seasons, point system bag limits, frameworks dates, or season lengths.

The Fish and Wildlife Service is seeking public comments and recommendations concerning these and other alternatives. Specific regulations will be chosen through the usual process in consultation with Flyway Councils, Canadian agencies, and other appropriate groups. Comments should be submitted by April 15 to the Director (FWS/MBMO), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240. Further information on this proposal is contained in a document published in the February 15 issue of the Federal Register.